The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE DOWN SIDE OF A MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

Text: "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision...'"
Matthew 17:9 (NRSV)

One of my favorite experiences is flying into O'Hare at night. I've done it many times and I still find the view irresistible, and always stop reading and watch as that incredible sight stretches out almost to the horizon - a universe of sparkling lights which slowly turn into freeways and lake shore and then skyline and individual through streets. . . .

It always reminds me of the first time my parents took me to the top of a mountain just west of our city in Western Pennsylvania to see the lights. It's part of a major ridge in the Alleghenies which posed a serious barrier to the railroads in the middle of the 19th century. At first they stopped the rail line at the bottom and portaged the freight to the top of the ridge by way of locks and barges pulled by mules. And if you have ever had the pleasure of traveling by rail from Chicago to New York, you may remember descending around the Horseshoe Curve – which was the way the challenge was resolved, an engineering marvel . . . all of which has very little to do with this sermon except that the Horseshoe Curve climbs a mountain not far from the ridge which gave me my first look at the city from the perspective of height, a mountain with the wonderful name of Wopsonanauk. What I recall – and the reason people still drive up the tortuous, steep road – is that from the top you see truth that you cannot see when you are down there, walking around on the sidewalks of the city. You see a dimension which is only visible up there. . . . Your little world is actually a pretty big place – an important truth. You also see a transfiguration of sorts. Down there where you have done all of your "living and moving and having being," it is an undistinguished, ordinary, dirty, industrial town. But from the perspective of a few thousand feet suddenly it looks beautiful – another important truth.

What is it about mountains that fascinates and compels us? Why the constant stream of tourists ascending to the heights of the only thing resembling Wopsonanauk around here – namely the Hancock Building? Why can't I resist the view from the descending airplane window? There is more here than beauty. There is fascination – intrigue – there is something of mystery and, if you will, awe, reverence, adoration. . . . "Wow!" we say when we step to the window of the observation deck – which is always, I think, a kind of prayer of adoration.

The ancients knew that deity resides on the mountain top. So mountains are sacred, holy places, characterized by clouds, mists, sometimes steam, vapor and unaccountable fiery eruption. In the ancient world people ascended mountains uneasily. The Acropolis, Kilimanjaro, Sinai.

When Moses and God consult it is on the mountain top. Slogging around in the valleys and deserts for forty years, leading a reluctant tribe of Nomads, Moses is summoned actually by God and goes to the top of Mt. Sinai where there is smoke and clouds and mystery and his face shines – which in the ancient world is what happens when you meet God. And on the mountain Moses receives the law, the Ten Commandments, the moral and social structure for life as God's Chosen People. It is a sacred spot.

When Jesus wants to teach a new law, he summons the disciples to the Mt. of Olives and delivers what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. When he dies, it is on a cross erected on a hill called Calvary . . . lifted up, stretching to the sky – even in death.

And in the very middle of the story he invites the inner circle, Peter, James and John, to accompany him to the mountain top. It is an experience of considerable mystery and power, the transfiguration. He is transformed on the mountain. His face and garments shine. There is a cloud and a voice and Peter, James and John, understandably, are scared out of their wits, fall on their faces. When they are courageous enough to look up, it's over. It's just Jesus again, looking like he always looked.

The interesting thing about both of these incidents is that each has a down side. While Moses is on Mt. Sinai meeting with God the people are living it up in the valley. They've pooled all their resources, including their earrings, melted it all down and constructed a golden calf. As Moses struggles down over the rocks of Mt. Sinai clutching two stone tablets, he hears the sound of music and people dancing – a party, in full volume, and he breaks the stone tablets on which were written the precious commandments and burns the golden calf. Quite a comedown from that mysterious and exquisite time on the mountain.

For Peter, James and John, the sequence is similar. On the down side of their mountain top experience, they, too, encounter a noisy crowd looking for Jesus. It includes a man who has brought his epileptic son to the disciples: Jesus heals the boy and the crowd, still milling about, watching, is astonished.

It's a wonderful story, loaded with sermonic possibilities. The traditional treatment goes like this: Peter wants to stay on the mountain top and institutionalize the experience, but Jesus forces them to come back down into the valley where human need and human suffering define the faithful Christian response.

But the scholars warn the preacher against coming down too quickly. What happened there was very important for the developing faith of the disciples. The symbols with which the writer describes the experience – the cloud, shining garments, the mysterious voice – as suggestions only, pointing to an experience that does not describe easily. I don't think anyone can know what exactly happened. What we can know is the power and effect on those who participated in it. They saw Jesus differently. They saw truth about him that they had never seen before. What it meant to them was the reality of God, the power of God's love, God's grace, God's forgiveness – the power of God over all other power. They were in the presence of the holy . . . what Rudolph Otto called the "Mysterium Tremendum."

Peter's response, I have always thought, was funny. He sounds like a Presbyterian – a new member of the Board of Trustees or the Facilities Committee, standing there in the "white wind of eternity," with Jesus' garments glowing, and the cloud descending, and the mysterious voice: and Peter says "Let's build! Let's construct three booths. Let's nail down this glory, this mystery – let's institutionalize it. This has been so awesome, let's preserve it so at least we can come back up here when we are tired and get energized and pumped up with the spirit again. Let's build us a spiritual retreat center."

Jesus ignores Peter's suggestion and on the way down from the mountain says one of those perplexing things about not telling anybody about what happened.

Why not? Why in the world would you not want to share something as incredible as what happened? Unless you can never quite do it, and in the very trying you demean and diminish the experience. It happens, you know. There are human experiences of such complexity that you can't define them with much precision. That's ultimately what's wrong with graphic sexuality in the movies. It's not that watching sexual intimacy is harmful or wrong; it's just that powerful mystery doesn't describe well and some of the efforts diminish and demean.

"Don't tell anyone about the vision," Jesus instructs them as they come down and what that means, I think, is this. Don't even think of trying to explain your most profound religious experiences – because you can't. Don't even try to rationalize and categorize and understand those wonderful mysteries that happen to you. Experience them, live in them, value them, treasure them. Don't explain.

Let's not leave the mountain too quickly. God gives moments of transfiguration and transformation, moments of clarity and truth, to each of us, I believe, and we don't have to tell anyone about them to verify and substantiate and document them.

And now – we are ready to come down. That is, I believe, where the energy and momentum are in these stories: down, down from the mountain top, down in the valley, down where the people play games and dance around a golden calf; down where there are crowds of noisy people and fathers and mothers desperate over their children, and young boys and girls suffering and dying unnecessarily.

If they didn't get it before, they must have that day. Whatever else Jesus was, he was fully a man; and whatever else following him means, it begins when we follow him down the mountain and wade into the crowd and deal with the sick boy.

It's a familiar dynamic. Ministers get to play a role in one of the truly mountain top human experiences: when we preside at weddings. People are dressed more gorgeously than they ever will be again. The music is wonderful; the flowers are beautiful. All the important people in life are there – focused on the bride and groom. It is extraordinary. And the minister asks them to vow that they will be husband and wife "in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health." Other churches add "for better or for worse" for good measure. It is not difficult, of course, to be happy and full of love and kindness and faithfulness on that day. But I never say those words in a wedding without remembering a friend of mine, a man in his 80s who spent his last years caring for his wife who had descended into the valley of Alzheimer's. And when she finally had to be placed in a care facility, he went everyday and sat with her for an hour or so long after she stopped recognizing him, and even when she started asking him to leave because her husband, she hoped, might come to see her. It was, I thought the most painful thing I had ever witnessed. I asked why he kept it up and he said because "I promised to – 'for better or worse.' We had a lot of the 'better'; this is the 'worse' part."

The momentum of discipleship is down from the mountain top to the city, the streets, the people below. Jim Wallis, head of the Sojourners Community in Washington, DC says: "In Jesus, God hits the streets. God is in this with us." [*Envisioning the New City, A Reader on Urban Ministry*, p. 57]

Wallis suggests that a truly Biblical image of God is not at all the traditional white robed grandfather that seems to inhabit the popular imagination. If you have to have a mental icon – an image of God – one that is informed by the Bible, Wallis says, would be an African American grandmother weeping over the plight of her grandchildren.

Because the God who came to us in Jesus Christ, comes into the everyday humdrum of life, so men and women who would be his, who would be faithful, follow him down from the mountain top. In a new book about urban ministry, Donna Schaper writes: churches that wish to be faithful "...will make friends with trouble." That is, they will go, intentionally, to those places where human life is lived and suffering hurts and hunger gnaws and need is real...into the valley because that is what Jesus did.

It is the day of our Annual Meeting – the occasion when we hold one another accountable for the life and work of this congregation. I'd like to celebrate it – not in a self-congratulatory way, but in a way we can all feel part of, because it does, I believe, reflect the downward momentum of discipleship. For many of us this hour is the mountain top, with glorious music, in this glorious space. One hour only. Let me tell you about a day in the life of Fourth Presbyterian Church:

> – It's a week day and it's snowing on this morning and I hear the housemen and the snow blower at 5:00 a.m. because by 7:30 the sidewalk will be busy, and by 9:00 people will be stopping in the sanctuary on their way to work or shop.
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> -At 6:45 a.m. a men's breakfast discussion group gathers at the back entrance.
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> -The Counseling Center has opened at 7:00 and receives several before-work clients.
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> -At 7:30 a large group of urban professionals gathers as the first of several Alcoholics Anonymous groups which will meet here this day.
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> -They greet warmly another group – this one the church's own Long Range Plan Committee gathering for its 7:30 meeting.

-By 8:30 the parking lot crisis is in full swing:

*parents are dropping off children at the Day School and at the Child Care Co-op;

*and older adults have gathered for an exercise class in Social Hall;

*the receptionist is now in place; ministers and support staff are arriving and the switchboard is up and running. Someone will be on duty there until 9:00 at night, daily, perhaps the longest church hours in the country.

-at 9:00 a.m. the staff has gathered for prayers in The Blair Chapel and people in the congregation are prayed for by name.

-by 9:30 almost all rooms in the church are occupied:

*in the Center for Older Adults art lessons and French lessons and Bible study and Tai Chi – in additional to the services of the Wellness Nurse, taking blood pressure, talking with patients;

*the Women's Benevolent Guild is gathered to sew and make crafts for those in need;

*and a Presbytery committee meets to discuss urban problems.

-Throughout the day there are community 12 Step meetings, including:

Alcoholics Anonymous

Alanon

Anorexics Anonymous

Overeaters Anonymous

Incest Survivors

Why Me? (Breast cancer group)

-The Elam Davies Social Service Center sees a steady stream of those in need of food, housing, clothing, encouragement.

-A bus load of students from a religion class at Valparaiso University arrive for a tour.

-A women's book group gathers to discuss a recent novel by a woman author.

-By 5:30 the meetings of church committees begin everywhere from the Crow's Nest to Westminster House Lounge.

-The Invitation Committee gathers for their weekly meeting to follow up on those who have visited Fourth Church.

-The 48 member Board of Deacons gathers for dinner and a meeting that oversees everything from Homeless Cooking to the church van.

-In Flynn Hall the strenuous IMPACT program teaches self-defense to women.

-The Brownie Scouts are in a Church School room; the Boy Scouts are in the Scout Room; the choir is rehearsing; Young Adults are eating pizza in Page Smith Parlors and planning the Loop Breakfast series; the church van has just departed carrying volunteers to Cook County Hospital and Cook County Jail and a support group for mothers with young children has gathered.